

Crossroads

By Christopher Cerasi

(This story takes place 3 months before *The Courtship of Princess Leia*)

Princess Leia Organa could not sleep. After tossing and turning for a few restless hours, she decided to get out of bed and try to use the time constructively. Ever since leaving the Hapes Cluster five standard hours ago, she could not calm her thoughts and felt overwhelmed after everything she witnessed and discussed with the formidable Hapan Queen Mother Ta'a Chume.

Leia had traveled to Hapes at the behest of Mon Mothma and the other council leaders in order to elicit military aid in the New Republic's battle against the renegade Imperial Warlord Zsinj. The normally reclusive and intensely private Hapans had made the unheard of gesture of inviting a New Republic representative to visit each of the 63 inhabited planets in the Hapes Cluster, and Leia had been unanimously chosen for the daunting diplomatic task. Mon Mothma was quick to point out that since Leia's diplomatic skills were by far the most polished, and her compassion legendary, Leia was the most logical choice. Normally Leia might have resisted a mission that would take her so far from home and her loved ones, but given that both Han and Luke were occupied on long-term assignments and would not be back for some time, Leia agreed to represent the New Republic on Hapes.

She poured herself a glass of water and paced the central living area of her stateroom. Her quarters aboard the Star Destroyer *Rebel Dream* were spacious and stylish, but tonight Leia felt cramped and restless. She had been onboard this ship almost the entire time she had been in the Hapes Cluster these many weeks, and she longed to return to Coruscant. There she could think and move around, and there she would eventually be reunited with Han.

Han. It had been over two months since she said goodbye to her beloved space pirate, and she missed him terribly. Still a general in the New Republic military, he had been tracking down Zsinj in the hopes of putting a stop to the tyrant's reign of terror. While he tried to contact her as often as he could, it had been too infrequent for both of them. Their communication was usually rushed and less-than-romantic, but war did not leave much room for romance. Leia had to remind herself of that whenever she felt lonely, which was often lately.

She turned her mind back to her mission to the Hapes Cluster. Frustratingly, Leia could not tell if the mission had been a success or not, as the Hapans and their Queen Mother remained completely unreadable and very non-committal. After weeks of diplomatic meetings, receptions, dinners and ceremonies, Leia could still not get a solid read on the Queen Mother. When Leia departed Hapes, Ta'a Chume merely told her that they would speak again soon. And that was that.

Hapes itself had been a dream. From the minute her shuttle touched down and she smelled the cool, fragrant air of the lush world and felt the gentle breezes on her cheeks, she knew why the Hapans treasured their homeworld so much. It was at once so alien and yet so familiar. It felt like Alderaan. It felt like *home*. And that made her even more wistful than she already was. As Queen Mother Ta'a Chume greeted her warmly and led her over to a lush lawn where refreshments had been artfully set up, Leia had a flash of a possible future, one of her and Han living here together, and it filled her with such longing that Leia thought her heart would break. As the Queen Mother motioned Leia to sit across from her, Leia forced her feelings back and focused on the task at hand.

"You realize that if we give you military and financial aid, we will want something in return," Ta'a Chume said, abandoning any pretense of small talk.

Leia hid her surprise at the queen's directness. She gave Ta'a Chume her best diplomatic smile and said "Of course. We would not presume to think otherwise. Hapes and its members would fully be a part of the New Republic and all the benefits, both political and other, that that entails."

"Yes, of course, Princess. But you misunderstand me. We would require something from you *personally*."

This time Leia could not conceal her surprise. She collected herself and set her teacup gently down on its delicate saucer. "*Me?* Forgive me, your majesty, but I am only an ambassador. I don't know what I could possibly-"

Ta'a Chume cut her off. "You are the one we are impressed with, Princess. Both your reputation and your strength have been well proven and more than justified during this trip. As you know from everything you have witnessed during your time with us, we are a society that values the strength of our women more than anything else. I have noticed this same strength in you, and that is why I will give this matter my fullest attention. Your New Republic should be grateful to have someone as strong as you. Someone who can lead her people to better days. I will deliberate with my council on all that is required, and we will communicate with you as soon as we reach our decision."

"Thank you, your majesty," Leia replied, trying to get a definitive answer out of Ta'a Chume. The sinking feeling in Leia's gut meant that she knew the queen mother would give her no more, and that her long mission had come to a close. "I hope that there will be good news, and that it will come sooner rather than later."

If the queen mother picked up on Leia's gentle hit, she did not give any physical or verbal indication. As she signaled a server to freshen Leia's tea, Ta'a Chume smiled cryptically at the Princess. "You must join us tonight for one last meal before you return to Coruscant and your New Republic. I'm sure your people must miss you terribly."

The rest of the day Leia spent touring the parts of Hapes she had not seen during her initial visit. When Ta'a Chume left her alone to dress for dinner, Leia suddenly felt very tired and very melancholy. She could not shake her funk during the long and elaborate dinner with Ta'a Chume, and by the time she said her goodbyes to her hosts and boarded her shuttle, she remained lost in sad thought. She had gone right to her chambers and asked not to be disturbed and tried to sleep off her fatigue and sadness.

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Now, as she stood staring out a window at the seemingly endless sea of stars, what gnawed at Leia more than Ta'a Chume's abrupt dismissal of her and her frustrating lack of an answer, more even than Zsinj's forces, was the fact that life after the Empire's defeat was far from what she had hoped and wanted it to be. She and Han and Luke found themselves continually on the front lines of skirmish after skirmish, battle after battle. Weren't things supposed to calm down after Endor? Leia wanted time to spend with Luke, to get to know the brother she recently discovered she had, despite their knowing each other for years. It was still new and still unbelievable, but lately Luke was away on his continual quest searching for Jedi. And Han?

She should have been spending *more* time with Han instead of less. The Empire's defeat was supposed to have given them much needed peace and quiet, a chance for them to be together after being separated all those long, lonely months while Han was still frozen in carbonite and cruelly hanging on Jabba the Hutt's palace wall. Instead meetings, training, and missions constantly separated them, and now this blasted war with Zsinj. It wasn't what she wanted for them, not at all. And she felt selfish for feeling this way. A small part of her didn't care, but she knew that duty always had to come first, self second. It was how she was raised and what she expected of herself, and knew what others expected of her as well.

But she could not ignore that small part of her that just wanted to find Han and run off with him. To abandon the businesses of government and diplomacy and have him leave his smuggling and military careers behind. She wanted them to start a life together, to just be with each other and not be disturbed.

But that was a fantasy, and this was reality. Sometimes she disliked reality. And sometimes she could accept reality and try to make the best of it. She sighed and decided to try the latter tact. She walked to her suite's comm unit, and after a few seconds, the ship's captain responded.

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"Captain Carhill, can you try to make contact with General Solo for me, please?"

"Right away, Princess."

As Leia waited to be connected to Han, she chastised herself for wallowing in self-pity and resolved to make the most of her time until Han returned from the war. She would see when Luke was due back from his latest mission as well, and maybe the two of them could take some time together as a family.

There was so much she wanted to tell Han, to share with him. She wanted the two of them to grow close again, to reconnect after so much distance. Sometimes she felt there was no one in the galaxy who understood her better than Han; not even her own brother.

The comm's chime brought Leia back to reality, and with a smile she prepared to hear Han's voice. She felt she had missed it more than ever lately, and she could not wait to tell him about her mission to Hapes and how much he would like the planet; how much it had reminded her of Alderaan.

But it was Captain Carhill whose voice addressed her instead. "I'm sorry, Your Highness, but we were unable to reach General Solo. He's either too far out of range or otherwise engaged. We've had reports that the fighting on the front lines has been intense, so perhaps that's why. Shall I try again?"

"No. No thank you, Captain. Thank you anyway."

"Of course, Your Highness. Good night."

Leia signed off and stood by the comm unit for a few seconds, cursing softly to herself. She headed back toward her bedroom but only made it a few feet before she slumped down on the couch, overwhelmed. She decided to do something she had not had the luxury of doing for weeks, perhaps months. She decided to finally give in to her feelings. Waves of sadness and frustration coursed over her and Princess Leia Organa began to cry. She did not stop for some time.